

THE COUNTY HOME IN INDIANA: A FORGOTTEN RESPONSE TO POVERTY AND DISABILITY

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This thesis is available in its original form online at <http://cardinalscholar.bsu.edu/>. The appendix contains photographs and information about all extant county home buildings.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the county home was a fixture in each of Indiana's ninety-two counties. Known by a variety of names, such as poorhouse, poor farm, county farm, poor asylum, or county infirmary, the county home offered shelter to those unable to provide for themselves. Residents included the mentally and physically disabled, those with mental illnesses, unwed mothers, the aged, and orphaned children, along with whole families too poor to live independently. The county home was the original homeless shelter, foster home, mental institution, and rehabilitation facility. This institution was publicly owned and managed at the county level, and it preceded any state or federal government welfare policies. Most counties built large, stately, institutional-style brick structures to serve this purpose. Poverty, until the Great Depression, was mainly a local problem.

However, with the Great Depression came changes in social welfare policies, most notably with the passage of the Social Security Act of 1935. Following this legislation, the need for the county home decreased drastically. Subsequent welfare legislation further emptied the county home, until the institution was widely abandoned across Indiana. Fourteen county homes remain in operation under public ownership, but this number is dwindling due to a variety of interconnected and complex reasons. More than one-third of Indiana's county homes have been demolished. The nearly systematic abandonment and subsequent destruction of county homes erases an era of Indiana history in which caring for the poor and disabled was a legitimate function of local government.

The increasing rarity of the county home structure makes it of special interest to the preservationist. Apart from one, all are fifty years or older and are therefore historic. The institutional form was rarely used twice in a county, and buildings of similar mass and scale are few. In most cases, the county home is second only to the county courthouse in architectural significance and social importance among local government buildings. Common architects were commissioned for the designs of both. The existence of such a structure tells of the social history of the county and state.

The very first American almshouse dates back to 1657 in Rensselaerswyck, New York. However, such institutions were not immediately built in Indiana upon its settlement. During the first half of the nineteenth century, other means of dealing with poverty were more common. The farming-out system was the favored method of caring for the able-bodied poor from at least 1799 to well into the nineteenth century. Paupers were auctioned off annually by the county to the lowest bidder, who was responsible for their room and board. They were also expected to keep the pauper "at moderate labor."

Poor farms were suggested in Indiana's 1816 constitution, but it was not until 1821 that the state approved the establishment of one poorhouse, in Knox County. A decade later, in 1831, the state authorized the establishment of asylums for the poor in each of Indiana's counties, which grew to number ninety-two. The more settled counties built county homes first. Oftentimes, this first poor farm was nothing more than a pre-existing farm purchased by the county for use as such. In other cases, it was a building quickly erected. However, counties prided themselves in having poor farms and included whole sections regarding their establishment in the county histories published around the turn of the twentieth century. The county home was recognized as a sign of civilization. Some of these early houses were common double-pile forms and featured Federal or Greek Revival stylistic touches.

However, these first poorhouses were soon outgrown. Their replacements were always brick, and wore the style of their day. This second generation of more substantial poorhouses was constructed between 1870 and 1915, approximately. Those built in the 1870s, like the Noble County Asylum, were outfitted with the brackets and hooded windows of Italianate style. From 1880 to 1910, Romanesque Revival was prevalent.

Around 1890, there was a marked shift in poor house design. The residential form of earlier poor houses was abandoned in favor of the institutional plan. Beginning in 1889, the newly-formed Board of State Charities and Correction reviewed plans for new county infirmary buildings. Board members would visit county homes, jails, and similar establishments and report their observations in the annual *Indiana Bulletin*. In its architectural review capacity, the board sought to standardize infirmary design and suggested that each infirmary have four distinct parts in its floor plan. Preferred plans contained an administrative area toward the front and center of the building, with domestic areas to the rear, and wings on each side for men and women.

These later county homes were designed by architects of regional prominence. Some, like Wing and Mahurin of Fort Wayne, even sought commissions by advertising in the *Indiana Bulletin*. The firm designed at least four county infirmaries, three of which are still extant in Marshall, Kosciusko, and Sullivan Counties.

Though most county homes were built in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there are a few examples from the more recent past. Infirmaries inspired by the styles of the mid-twentieth century appeared across the state, though in small numbers. For example, three neoclassical county homes were built during the 1930s in Parke, Wells, and Whitley Counties. The most recent county homes, built between 1953 and 1987, display the contemporary styles popular at the time of their construction and closely resemble the private nursing homes that were being constructed in the most Indiana communities during this time. Bartholomew County Home for the Aged was designed by notable architect Harry Weese, who designed other Modern buildings in Columbus during the 1950s and '60s.

County homes have been demolished in all parts of the state. The demolition of most of Indiana's county homes has followed a similar storyline. County homes began to close at a steady rate in the second half of the twentieth century, after it became apparent that the federal government was not going to withdraw from the realm of welfare, which it had entered during the Great Depression. Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid, along with the many new private nursing homes, were replacing the county home as social safety nets. These new methods of care for the poor, sick, and elderly were perceived as better than the old county

poorhouse, and they were not drawing from the county budget. It was this reasoning that led to the closure of most of Indiana's county homes and continues to do so today. Nevertheless, closing the county home did not totally relieve the county commissioners of their responsibility to it. The county home, its outbuildings, and farmland were still county-owned property.

Vacancy and deferred maintenance plague county homes following their closure. In many cases, when budget shortfall is one of the reasons for closure, maintenance has already been deferred for quite some time. The ten county homes that sit vacant in Indiana serve as testimony that reuse is not easy. Many are still under county ownership and are a burden to county commissioners. More questions than answers usually arise from discussions about the vacant county home. What are the rules associated with selling county property? How much would it cost to rehabilitate the county home building? Is the building safe? What if the county home is sold, only to become further dilapidated or misused? These are just a few of the questions that are asked. Unfortunately, the easy answer is often demolition, or total erasure of the problem.

Fifty percent of Indiana's remaining county homes are being adaptively re-used. The most common re-use is residential. Several county homes have been converted into single-family homes and apartments, while a few have undergone little renovation and now serve as not-for-profit group housing. Two county homes have transitioned to nursing homes, while two others fall under the broad heading of "community use." Bartholomew County Home for the Aged now serves as a Salvation Army Corps building, while Scott County Home is now the county museum.

Fourteen Indiana county homes still serve their original purpose. Though this number continues to dwindle, most Hoosiers believe that the system was abandoned entirely long ago. In some facets, Indiana's functioning county homes have changed little since the nineteenth century, while in other ways they have changed greatly.

Local administration has remained much the same for the last one hundred years. All county homes are managed by a superintendent, sometimes also called a director or administrator. Historically, a county home superintendent and his wife, the matron, lived in the infirmary building. Then, as now, they were chosen by the county commissioners. Three current county home superintendents were hired with their spouses. These three superintendents all live at the county home, as does the administrator of one other county home.

Today, county homes may accommodate anyone who is at least eighteen years of age. While residents do tend to be senior citizens, there is hardly a county home in Indiana that does not have at least one resident under fifty. A few even have residents who are in their twenties. Most residents suffer from mental retardation or mental illness. All are ambulatory, or able to walk. Vegetable gardens were visible at several county homes, as were an abundance of cats, to which residents have taken a special liking. Some residents hold jobs. County transportation services take some residents to their places of employment, while other residents are employed within the county home.

The county home is governed by the county commissioners, who manage all county-owned property. Most counties have three commissioners who are elected to that position for four years. Annual budgets and large expenditures of any sort are approved by the

commissioners, along with the county council. The commissioners must approve those who wish to reside in the county home. Most importantly, the commissioners may decide if the county home remains open or closes.

Besides the county commissioners, there is one other wholly separate entity to whom the county home superintendent must report. The Residential Care Assistance Program (RCAP) is a program administered by Indiana's Division of Aging, which is part of the Family and Social Services Administration. The state program pays for the room and board of people who are at least sixty-five years of age, blind, or disabled and who have few monetary resources, so long as they reside in a county home or licensed residential care facility, but it is currently frozen. What this freeze on the program entails is that no new people can be enrolled in RCAP. Therefore, as people leave a facility, their position may not be filled by a new RCAP recipient. This has greatly impacted county homes' budgets. The responsibility of welfare, at least at the level of the county home, is being returned to the counties. Some county homes have started accepting residents at lower, negotiated rates or even those who have no income at all. The average rate to reside in an Indiana county home is \$37.50 per day.

Indiana's county homes are ever-changing. In the year since this thesis was written, it is likely that circumstances have changed at several county homes. Warren County was in the process of closing its county home in the spring of 2013, and Daviess County's home, Lighthouse Recovery Center, was discovered to be in need of great repairs that may lead to its vacancy or demolition. Boone County's Maple View Rest Home will likely close at the end of 2014. It is difficult to predict if any functioning county homes will endure through the next decade or if they will become entirely part of history. It is impossible to know how many presently vacant homes will be put into use tomorrow or allowed to further deteriorate.

Photographs, Maps, and Tables

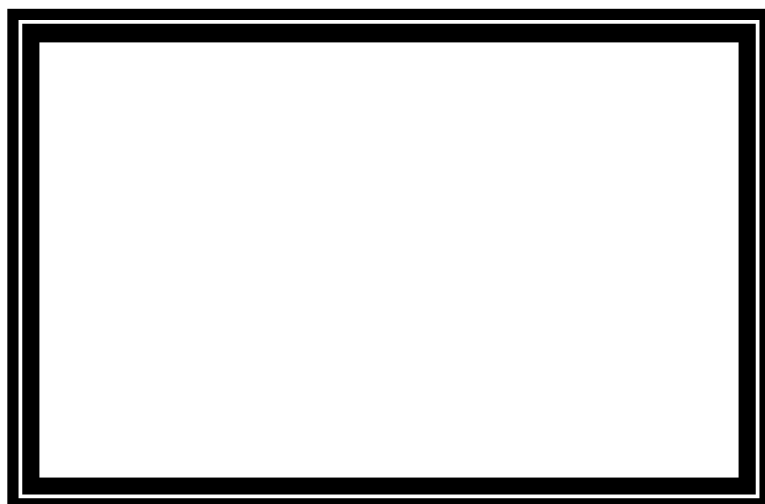


Figure 1 Switzerland County Poor Farm, built circa 1832, is Indiana's oldest extant county home.



Figure 2 Noble County Asylum, built in 1871.

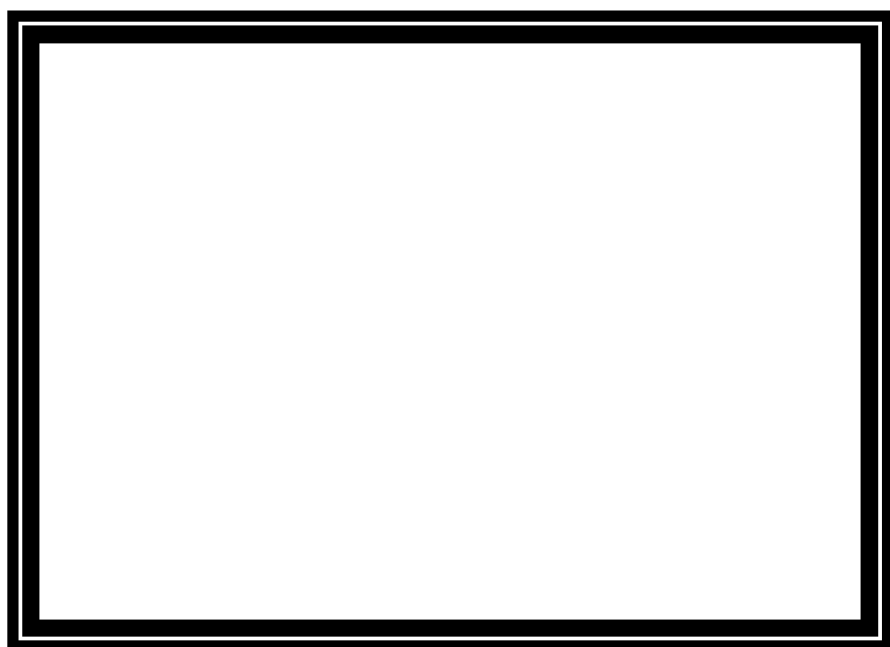


Figure 3 The Marshall County Infirmary, constructed in 1893, was designed by Fort Wayne architecture firm Wing and Mahurin and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. *Source:* Marshall County Historical Society, Plymouth, IN.



Figure 4 Bartholomew County Home for the Aged

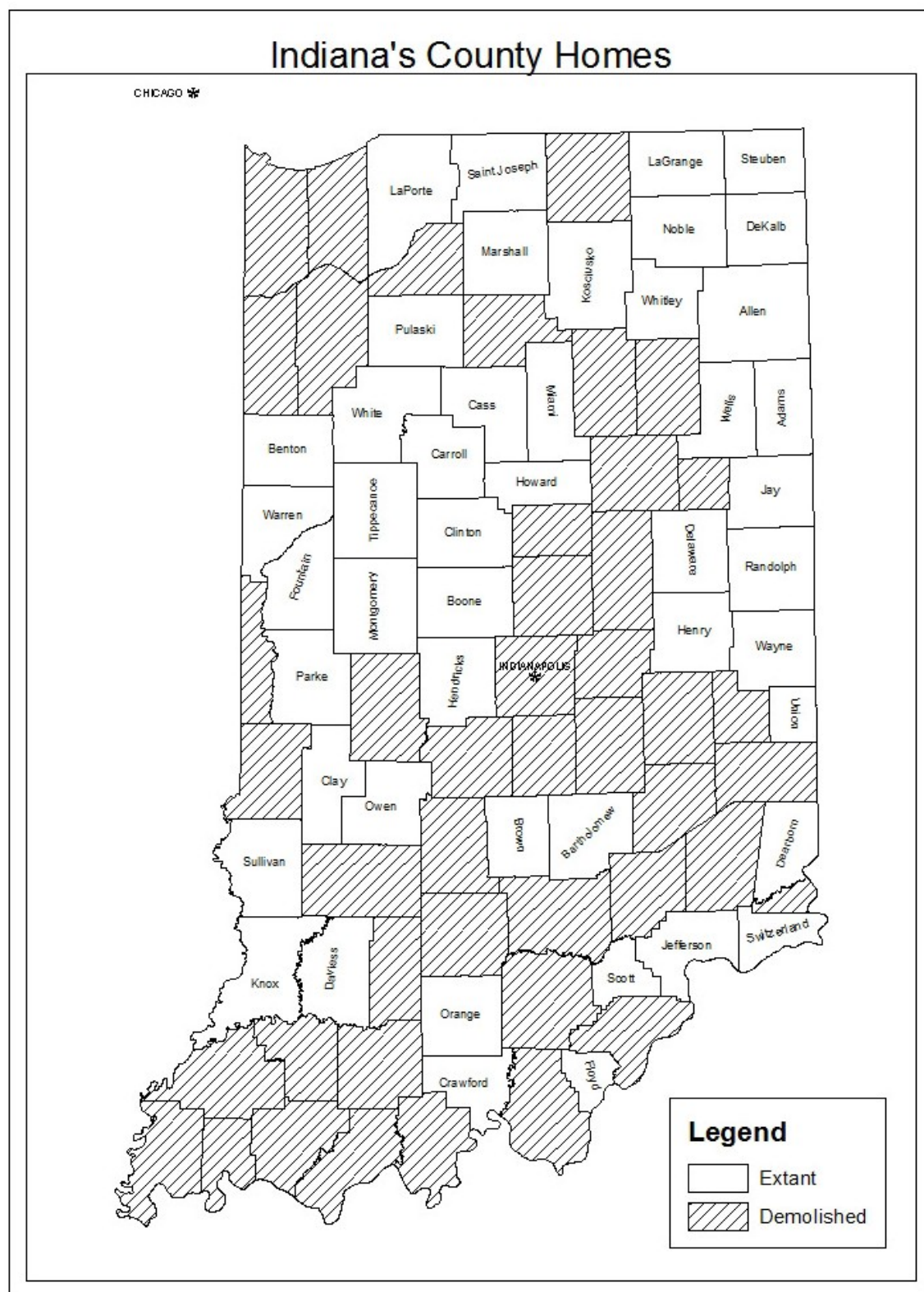


Figure 5 County homes remain standing in forty-seven of Indiana's ninety-two counties.

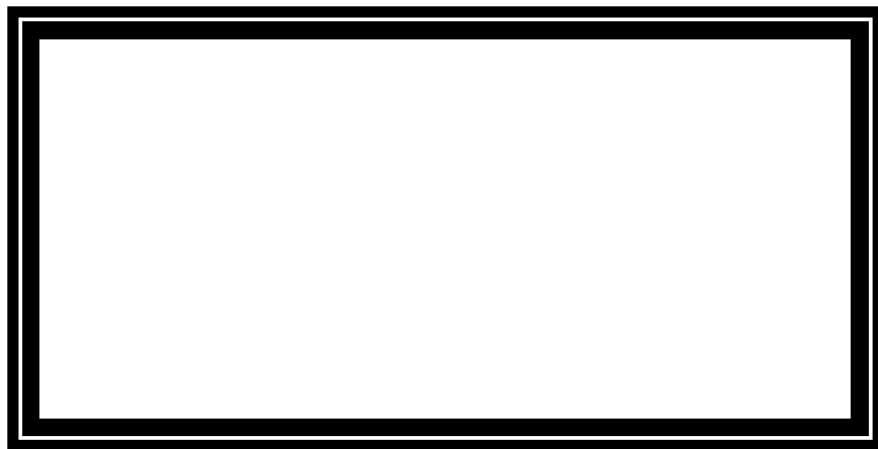


Figure 6 Randolph County Infirmary, built in 1899, sits vacant on U.S. 27 just outside of Winchester.

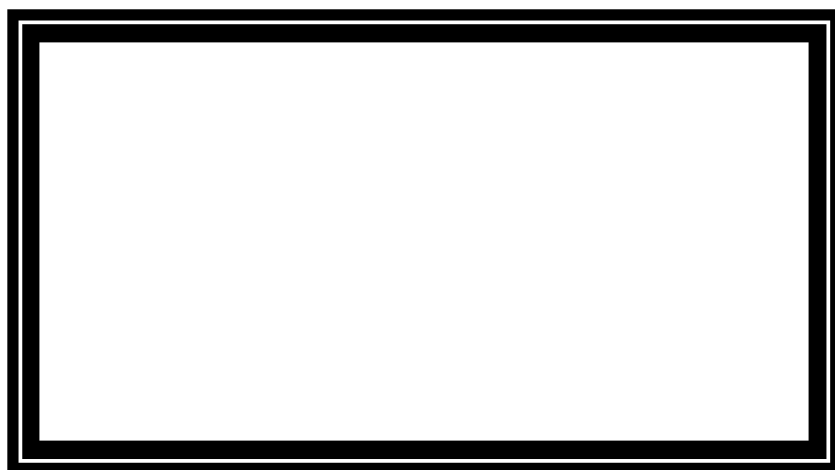


Figure 7 Warren County Poor Farm, built in 1869.

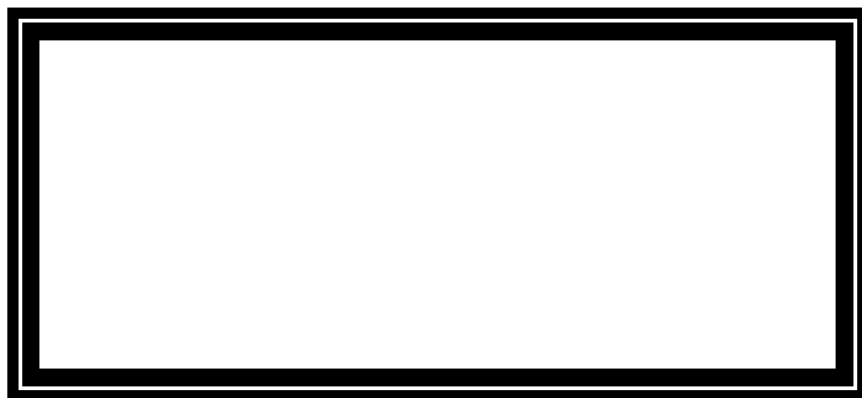


Figure 8 Parke County Poor Asylum

CURRENT USE OF COUNTY HOME BUILDINGS							
County Home	Vacant	Residence , single-family	Residential Apartments	Business / Offices	NFP Group Housing	Nursing Home	Community Use
Adams	Floyd	Crawford	LaGrange	Brown	Daviess	Allen	Bartholomew
Benton	Henry	Fountain	Miami*	Cass	Dearborn	Delaware	Scott
Boone	Knox	Jefferson	Noble	Clay	Marshall		
Carroll	Owen	Orange	Sullivan	Kosciusko	Montgomery		
Clinton	Parke	Owen	Wells	Miami*			
DeKalb	Randolph	Wayne	Whitley				
Hendricks	Steuben						
Howard	Switzerland						
Jay	Union						
LaPorte	White						
Pulaski							
Saint Joseph							
Tippecanoe							
Warren							
* Miami County contains residential apartments and a business. Therefore, it is listed twice in this table and counted in both use categories in calculations regarding the correlations between use and condition.							

Table 1.